

When area men fought, died at Stones River

Bloody conflict ended 125 years ago today

By STEPHEN A. THOMPSON

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, the American Civil War was nearing completion of two years of hostilities. In the east, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was in winter camps along the Rappahannock River 60 miles above Richmond. The unsuccessful invasion of Maryland earlier in the year had left the Confederate forces weakened and in need of fresh troops and supplies.

The situation in the western theater was somewhat similar. The Confederate Army of Tennessee was encamped around Murfreesboro, Tenn., after an October invasion of Kentucky had been turned back by Union forces at Perryville. Confederate General Braxton Bragg with 38,000 men blocked road and rail routes to Chattanooga. Although undermanned, Bragg's troops conducted many raids and demonstrations against the Union Army of the Cumberland based in and around Nashville.

The Army of the Cumberland, commanded by General William S. Rosecrans, consisted of 47,000 officers and men. Nashville was a newly acquired Union transportation center and supply depot. The union troops concentrating there during the fall of 1862 consisted of many units. The majority had been part of the force that had pursued Bragg south from Kentucky.

One veteran unit encamped in the massive Union bivouac was the 700 men of the 21st Illinois Infantry Regiment.

The 21st Illinois had been mustered in for three years of service in June 1861. The 10 companies of the regiment came from many area counties. Macon

W.S. Alexander of Paris.

During its first year and a half of service, the 21st had operated in a wide theater. It had participated in campaigns in southeastern Missouri, northern Arkansas, west and central Tennessee, northern Mississippi, and most recently against Bragg in Kentucky.

The 21st had been in camp around Nashville since early November 1862. The duty was light, only occasional picket or defensive operations. The majority of the time was spent recuperating from previous long marches, getting issued new shoes and winter uniforms, writing and receiving mail and generally enjoying the mild Tennessee fall.

As Christmas approached all the men of the 21st were aware of the substantial build-up of troops and supplies in the area. Christmas dinner would be the last for some. Privates John Ackerman of Arcola and William Furgason of Mattoon would not see the New Year.

On Dec. 26, Rosecrans moved the Union army in three separate columns southeast towards Murfreesboro. The 21st Illinois, part of the column under Major General McCook, took four days struggling with rain, fog, bad roads and the ever harassing Confederate cavalry to cover the 30 miles. On the afternoon of Dec. 30 the unit met the advanced picket forces of the Army of Tennessee, and continued to advance with minor casualties until darkness fell. As campfires became more visible along the line, the men of the 21st could see another line of fires only a half mile to their front. These fires represented the position of Confederate Major General Patrick Cleburne's division.

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Map of troop dispositions at start of battle shows position of 21st Illinois Regiment on the

perate battle.

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The Confederate maneuver on

captured was equal to almost half

unit w

Wedding bells
ring for area
couples — C3



More memorable
great newspaper
leads — C3



Local reviewer
gives *Overboard*
2½ stars — C5

showcase

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Conflict ended
ago today

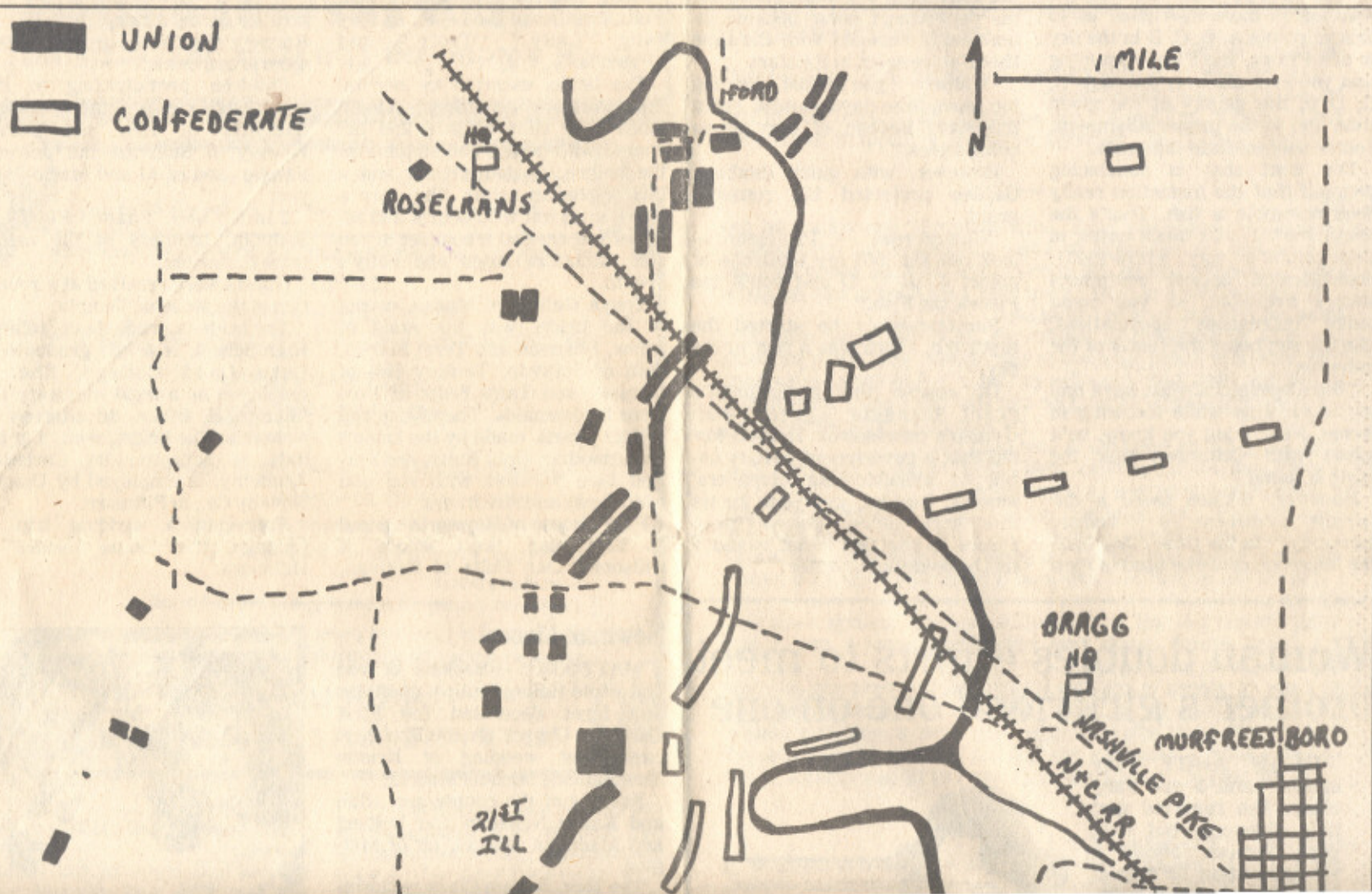
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700 men of the 21st Illinois Infantry Regiment.

The 21st Illinois had been mustered in for three years of service in June 1861. The 10 companies of the regiment came from many area counties. Macon, Cumberland, Piatt, Douglas, Moultrie, Edgar, Clay, Clark, Crawford and Jasper each raised a company. Intermixed in these companies were 30 to 40 Coles County residents, most serving with Company B from Cumberland County.

The 21st Illinois had the distinction of having as its first commander a then unknown colonel named U.S. Grant. Grant served until promotion to brigadier general in August 1861. The regiment's new commander was Col. John

mile to their front. These fires represented the position of Confederate Major General Patrick Cleburne's division.

General Rosecrans and Bragg had both developed strategies for a major battle on the 31st. The Union plan was to attack the Confederate right. By crossing the Stones River at McFadden's Ford, Rosecrans hoped to drive the Confederates back on Murfreesboro some four miles away.

Bragg had devised a plan to attack the Union right, and drive the Army of the Cumberland back on its supply lines along the Nashville Pike. With this accomplished, the second phase of the attack would be initiated. This phase would concentrate on pinning the Union forces against the river where they could be destroyed.

Offensive forces massed at opposite ends of the five-mile front. The advantage lay with the force that acted first.

The camp of the 21st Illinois was stirring before daybreak on Dec. 31. Cooks were starting breakfast, officers' horses were taken to water, and the troops were preparing to go into defensive positions on the Union right.

On a cool, clear morning one can hear for some distance. What the men of the 21st heard was not encouraging. To the southwest, the large number of troops moving, followed by artillery and rifle fire, signified the beginning of a des-

Map of troop dispositions

perate battle.

The Confederates had struck at first light and proceeded to crush the extreme Union right. Troops of the 21st Illinois braced for an attack which came from their front in the form of the 33rd Alabama and 46th Mississippi infantry regiments.

The attackers were not visible until they were almost upon the men of the 21st due to thick osage orange and cedar underbrush. The "modern" rifles used by the infantry had their effective ranges reduced to 50 yards. The volume and momentum of the Confederate assault sent the 21st Illinois reeling after a brief period of close combat.

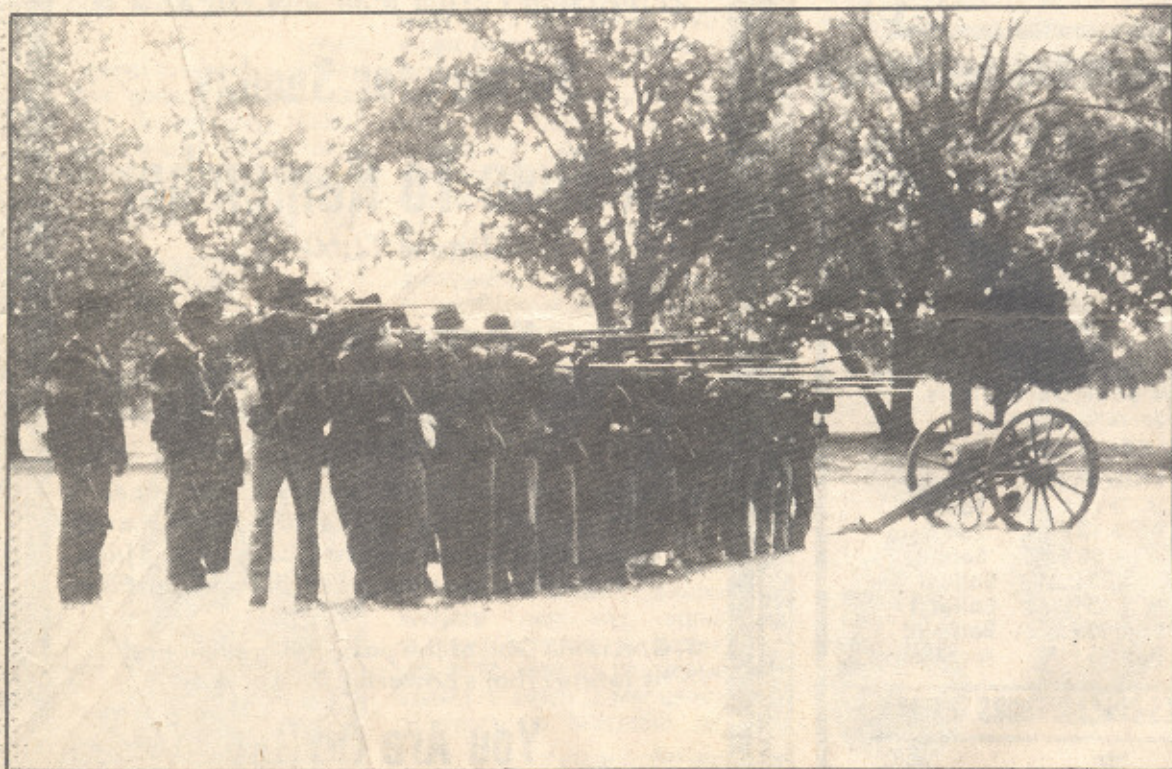
The 21st, along with most of the Union right, withdrew the rest of the morning under heavy pressure from pursuing Confederates. During the withdrawal Colonel Alexander was severely wounded and replaced by Lt. Col. Warren Mackin of Salem.

The 21st was finally able to fall behind a newly established Union line along the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad five miles from the original front. Here the 21st reorganized, resupplied and went into position on the Union right late in the afternoon.

Author expert on Stones River

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Thompson, who has been an interpreter at the Stones River National Battlefield near Murfreesboro, Tenn., is a student of military history with special interests in the Civil War and the European Theater of World War II.



Company of riflemen gives park visitors a Civil War demonstration

at start of battle shows position of 21st Illinois Regiment on the right of Union line

The Confederate maneuver on the Union right and center had caused much havoc. The Union forces were backed against the N&C Railroad and were in danger of having their supply lines to Nashville cut. Only a half-mile of open cotton fields separated the opposing forces.

Concentration of 60 artillery pieces and four regiments of U.S. regular infantry saved the day for the Union forces. Line after line of Confederate infantry tried unsuccessfully to assail the Union position throughout the afternoon of the 31st. One assault came within 30 yards of the guns of the Chicago Board of Trade Battery before being repulsed. As twilight approached, the fighting died down to the relief of both exhausted armies.

The dawn of New Year's Day brought relative inactivity to the battlefield. The Union army had solidified its defensive positions, and the Confederates were unwilling to attack any point in force.

Along the skirmish line of the 21st Illinois shock, disbelief and anger must have reverberated through the ranks. A letter written by First Lieutenant Phillip Welshimer of Neoga indicates the percentage of killed, wounded and

captured was equal to almost half the command. Each of the living had lost a comrade in some form. Coping with the physical exhaustion and emotional stress, the unit prepared for the next anticipated assault.

The renewed Confederate offensive came on Jan. 2, 1863, in the vicinity of McFadden's Ford on Stones River. Union artillery positioned on the left defeated the assault. Confederate infantry commanded by General John C. Breckinridge, a former U.S. vice president, made a valiant effort to cross the ford, but was turned back toward Murfreesboro with staggering losses.

General Bragg, fearing large Union reinforcements, decided to withdraw his army south to Tullahoma on Jan. 3. Union forces advanced across the river and into Murfreesboro on Jan. 4.

The defeat of the Confederate forces at Stones River had been a costly affair for both sides. The Confederates lost over 9,000 men killed or wounded. The Union losses were recorded as 14,000 killed, wounded or captured.

The 21st Illinois Infantry needed to regroup. Severely crippled during the battle, with losses totaling 303 of 700 combat effectives, the

unit went into camp in Murfreesboro and waited for replacements to arrive.

In May they were on the move again. Their next campaign would take them to the yet unknown battlefields of Chickamauga, Kennesaw Mountain and Atlanta.

The 21st Illinois would not be done with its war until December 1865 when it was mustered out in San Antonio, Texas.

As men on a mission to preserve the union of the United States, the veterans of the 21st Illinois must have felt pride in their accomplishments. They served four years in the most brutal conflict in U.S. history.

In the latter part of the 19th century, recollections of December combat along Stones River echoed throughout central Illinois households. Tales of a gray juggernaut advancing through thick Tennessee brush, loss of friends, and acts of bravery and courage were recounted. The horrors and often fruitless point of close combat came to light.

Now all these men have gone. More recent conflicts have overshadowed theirs, but none was more important in the domestic development of the United States than its own Civil War.



Replica of a smashed cannon lends reality to Stones River battlefield